A Woman Intervenes

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CHAPTER XIX.

"What name, please?"

"Tell Mr. Wentworth a lady wishes to see him."

The boy departed rather dubiously, for he knew that this message was decidedly irregular in a business office. People should give their names.

"A lady to see you, sir," he said to Wentworth, and then, just as the boy expected, his employer wanted to know the lady's name. Ladies are not frequent visitors at the offices of an accountant in the city, so Wentworth touched his collar and tie to make sure they were in their correct position, and wondering who the lady was, asked the boy to show her in.

"How do you do, Mr. Wentworth?" she said brightly, advancing toward his table and holding out her hand. Wentworth caught his breath, took the extended hand somewhat limply, then he pulled himself together and said:

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Brewster."

Jennie blushed very prettily and laughed a laugh that Wentworth thought was like a little rippie of music from a mellow flute.

"It may be unexpected," she said, "but you don't look a bit like a man suffering from an overdose of pure joy. You didn't expect to see me, did you?"

"I did not, but, now that you are here, may I ask in what way I can serve you?"

"Well, in the first place you may ask me to take a chair, and in the second place you may sit down yourself, for I have come to have a long talk with you."

The prospect did not seem to be so alluring to Wentworth as one might have expected when the announcement was made by a girl so pretty and dressed in such exquisite taste, but the young man promptly offered her a chair, and then sat down with the table between them. She placed her parasol and a few trinkets she had been carrying on the table, arranging them with some care; then, having given him time to recover from his surprise, she flashed a look at him that sent a thrill to the finger tips of the young man. Yet a danger understood is a danger half overcome; and Wentworth, unconsciously drawing a deep breath, nerved himself against any recurrence of a feeling he had been trying to forget, with but indifferent success, saying grimly, but only half convincingly to himself, "You are not going to fool me a second time, my girl, lovely as you are."

A glimmer of a smile hovered about the red lips of the girl, a smile hardly perceptible, but giving an effect to her clear complexion, as if a sunbeam had crept into the room and its reflection had lit up her face.

"I have come to apologize, Mr. Wentworth," she said at last. "I find it a very difficult thing to do, and, as I don't know just how to begin, I'll plunge right into it."

"You don't need to apologize to me for anything, Miss Brewster," replied Wentworth rather stiffly.

"Oh, yes, I do. Don't make it harder than it is by being too frigidly polite about it, but say you accept the apology, and that you're sorry—no—I don't mean that—I should say that you're sure I'm sorry, and that you know I won't do it again."

Wentworth laughed, and Miss Brewster joined him.

"There," she said, "that's ever so much better. I suppose you've been thinking hard things of me ever since we last met."

"I've tried to," replied Wentworth.

"Now, that's what I call honest; besides, I like the implied compliment. I think it's very neat indeed. I'm really very, very sorry that I—that things happened as they did. I wouldn't have blamed you if you had used exceedingly strong language about it at the time."

"I must confess that I did."

"Ah," said Jennie, with a sigh, "you men have so many comforts denied to us women. But I came here for another purpose; if I had merely wanted to apologize I think I would have written. I want some information which you can give me, if you like."

The young woman rested her elbows on the table, with her chin in her hands, gazing across at him earnestly and innocently. Poor George felt that it would be impossible to refuse anything to those large beseeching eyes.

"I want you to tell me about your mine."

And the geniality that had gradually come into Wentworth's face and manner vanished instantly.

"So this is the old business over again?" he said.

"How can you say that?" cried Jennie, reproachfully. "I am asking for my own satisfaction entirely, and not for my paper. Besides, I tell you frankly what I want to know, and don't try to get it by indirect means—by false pretenses—as you once said."

"How can you expect me to give you information that does not belong to me alone? I have no right to speak of a business which concerns others without their permission."

"Ah, then there are at least two others concerned in the mine," said Jennie, gleefully. "Kenyon is one, I know; who is the other?"

"Miss Brewster, I will tell you nothing."

"But you have told me something already. Please go on and talk, Mr. Wentworth—about anything you like—and I shall soon find out all I want to know about the mine."

She paused, but Wentworth remained silent, which, indeed, the bewildered young man realized, was the only safe way to do.

"They speak of the talkativeness of women," Miss Brewster went on, as if soliloquizing, "but it is nothing to that of the men. Once set a man talking and you learn everything he knows—besides ever so much more that he doesn't."

Miss Brewster had abandoned her very talking attitude, with its suggestion of confidential relations, and had removed her elbows from the table, sitting now back in her chair gazing dreamily at the dingy window which let the light in from the dingy court. She seemed to have forgotten that Wentworth was there, and said more to herself than to him:

"I wonder if Kenyon would tell me about the mine?"

"You might ask him."

"No, it wouldn't do any good," she continued, gently shaking her head. "He's one of your silent men, and there are so few of them in this world! Perhaps I had better go to William Longworth himself; he's not suspicious of me."

As she said this she threw a quick glance at Wentworth, and the unfortunate young man's face at once told her that she had hit the mark. She bent her brow over the table and laughed with such evident enjoyment that Wentworth, in spite of his helpless anger, smiled grimly.

Jennie raised her head, but the sight of his perplexed countenance was too much for her, and it was some time before her merriment allowed her to speak. At last she said:

"Wouldn't you like to take me by the shoulders and put me out of the room, Mr. Wentworth?"

"I'd like to take you by the shoulders and shake you."

"Ah, that would be taking a liberty, and could not be permitted. We must leave punishment to the law, you know, although I do think a man should be allowed to turn an objectionable visitor into the street."

"Miss Brewster," cried the young man, earnestly, leaning over the table toward her, "why don't you abandon your horrible inquisitorial profession and put your undoubted talents to some other use?"

"What, for instance?"

"Oh—anything."

Jennie rested her fair cheek against her open palm again and looked at the dingy window. There was a long silence between them, Wentworth absorbed in watching her clear-cut profile and her white throat, his breath quickening as he feasted his eyes on her beauty.

"I have always got angry," she said at last, in a low voice, with the quiver of a suppressed sigh in it, "when other people have said that to me—I wonder why it is I merely feel hurt and sad when you say it? It is so easy to say 'oh—anything'—so easy—so easy. You are a man, with the strength and determination of a man, yet you have met with disappointments and obstacles that have required all your courage to overcome. Every man has, and with most men it is a fight until the head is gray and the brain weary with the ceaseless struggle. The world is utterly merciless; it will trample you down relentlessly if it can, and if your vigilance relaxes for a moment it will steal your crust and leave you to starve. When I think of this incessant, sullen contest, with no quarter given or taken, I shudder and pray that I may die before I am at the mercy of the pitiless world. When I came to London I saw for the first time in my life that hopeless melancholy promenade of the sandwich men, human wreckage drifting along the edge of the street, as if they had been cast up there by the rushing tide sweeping past them. They—they seemed to me like a tottering procession of the dead—and on their backs was the announcement of a play that was making all London roar with laughter—the awful comedy and tragedy of it! Well, I simply couldn't stand it! I had to run up a side street and cry like the little fool I was, right in broad daylight."

Jennie paused and tried to laugh, but the effort ended in a sound suspiciously like a sob and she dashed her hand with quick impatience across her eyes, from which Wentworth had never taken his own, watching them dim as the light from the window proved too strong for them, and finally fill as she ceased to speak. Searching ineffectually about her dress for a handkerchief, which lay on the table beside her parasol, unnoticed by either, Jennie went on with some difficulty.

"Well, these poor forlorn creatures were once men—men who had gone down, and if the world is so hard on a man, with all his strength and resourcefulness, think—think what it is for a woman to be thrown into this inhuman human turmoil—a woman without friends—without money—flung among these relentless wolves—to live if she can—or—to die—if she can."

The girl's voice broke and she buried her face in her arms, which rested on the table.

Wentworth sprang to his feet and came round to where she sat.

"Jennie," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

The girl, without looking up, shook off the hand that touched her.

"Go back to your place!" she cried in a smothered voice. "Leave me alone!"

"Jennie," persisted Wentworth.

The young woman rose from her chair and faced him, stepping back a pace.

"Don't you hear what I say? Go back and sit down. I came here to talk business; not to make a fool of myself. It's all your fault, and I hate you for it—you and your silly questions."

But the young man stood where he was, in spite of the dangerous sparkle that lit up his visitor's wet eyes. A frown gathered on his brow.

"Jennie," he said slowly, "are you playing with me again?"

The swift answer that blazed up in her face, reddening her cheeks, dried the tears.

"How dare you say such a thing to me?" she cried hotly. "Do you flatter yourself that because I came here to talk business, I have also some personal interest in you? Surely even your self-conceit doesn't run so far as that?"

Wentworth stood silent, and Miss Brewster picked up her parasol, scattering in her haste the other articles on the floor. If she expected Wentworth to put them on the table again she was disappointed, for, although his eyes were upon her, his thoughts were far away upon the Atlantic Ocean.

"I shall not stay here to be insulted," she cried resentfully, bringing Wentworth's thoughts back with a rush to London again. "It is intolerable that you should use such an expression to me. Playing with you, indeed!"

"I had no intention of insulting you, Miss Brewster."

"What is it but an insult to use such a phrase? It implies that I either care for you or——"

"And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you care for me?"

Jennie shook out the lace fringes of her parasol and smoothed them with some precision. Her eyes were bent on what she was doing, and consequently they did not meet those of her questioner.

"I care for you as a friend, of course," she said at last, still giving much attention to the parasol. "If I had not looked on you as a friend I would not have come here to consult with you, would I?"

"No, I suppose not. Well, I am sorry I used the words that displeased you, and now, if you will permit it, we will go on with the consultation."

"It wasn't a pretty thing to say."

"I'm afraid I am not good at saying pretty things."

"You used to be." The parasol being arranged to her liking she glanced up at him. "Still you said you were sorry, and that's all a man can say—or a woman either, for that's what I said myself when I came in. Now, if you will pick up those things from the floor—thanks—we will talk about the mine."

Wentworth seated himself in his chair again and said:

"Well, what is it you wish to know about the mine?"

"Nothing at all."

"But you said you wanted information?"

"What a funny reason to give! And how a man misses all the fine points of a conversation! No; just because I asked for information, you might have known that was not what I really wanted."

"I'm afraid I'm very stupid. I hate to ask boldly what you did want, but I would like to know."

"I wanted a vote of confidence. I told you I was sorry because of a certain episode. I wanted to see if you trusted me, and I found you didn't. There."

"I think that was hardly a fair test. You see the facts did not belong to me alone."

Miss Brewster sighed and slowly shook her head.

"That wouldn't have made the least difference, if you had really trusted me."

"Oh, I say! You couldn't expect a man to ——"

"Yes, I could."

"What, merely a friend?"

Miss Brewster nodded.

"Well, all I can say," remarked Wentworth, with a laugh, "is that friendship has made greater strides in the States than it has in this country."

Before Jennie could reply the useful boy knocked at the door and brought in a tea tray which he placed before his master, then silently departed, closing the door noiselessly.

"May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Please. What a curious custom this drinking of tea is in business offices. I think I shall write an article on 'A Nation of Tea Tipplers.' If I were an enemy of England, instead of being its greatest friend, I would descend with my army on this country between the hours of 4 and 5 in the afternoon, and so take the population unawares while it was drinking tea. What would you do if the enemy came down on you during such a sacred national ceremony?"

"I would offer her a cup of tea," replied Wentworth, suiting the action to the phrase.

"Mr. Wentworth," said the girl, archly, "you're improving. That remark was distinctly good. Still, you must remember that I come as a friend, not as an enemy. Did you ever read the 'Babes in the Wood?' It is a most instructive but pathetic work of fiction. You remember the wicked Uncle, surely. Well, you and Mr. Kenyon remind me of the babes—poor, innocent little things, and London—this part of it—is the dark and pathless forest. I am the bird hovering about you, waiting to cover you with leaves. The leaves, to do any good, ought to be checks flattering down on you, but alas! I haven't any. If negotiable checks only grew on trees life would not be so difficult."

Miss Brewster sipped her tea pensively, and Wentworth listened to the musical murmur of her voice, which had such an entrancing effect on him that he paid less heed to what she said than a man should when a lady is speaking. The tea drinking had added a touch of domesticity to the tete-a-tete that rather went to the head of the young man. He clinched and unclinched his hand out of sight under the table and felt the moisture on his palm. He hoped he would be able to retain control over himself, but the difficulty of his task almost overcame him when she now and then appealed to him with glance or gesture, and he felt as if he must cry out, "My girl, my girl, don't do that, if you expect me to stay where I am."

"I see you are not paying the slightest attention to what I am saying," she said, pushing the cup from her. She rested her arms on the table, leaning slightly forward, and turning her face full upon him. "I can tell by your eyes that you are thinking of something else."

"I assure you," said George, drawing a deep breath, "I am listening with intense interest."

"Well, that's right, for what I am going to say is important. Now, to wake you up, I will first tell you all about your mine, so that you will understand I did not need to ask any one for information regarding it."

Here, to Wentworth's astonishment, she gave a rapid and accurate sketch of the negotiations and arrangements between the three partners and the present position of affairs.

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

"Never mind that, and you mustn't ask how I know what I am now going to tell you, but you must believe it implicitly, and act upon it promptly. Longworth is fooling both you and Kenyon. He is marking time, so that your option will run out; then he will pay cash for the mine at the original price, and you and Kenyon will be left to pay two-thirds of the debt incurred. Where is Kenyon?"

"He has gone to America."

"That's good. Cable him to get the option renewed. You can then try to form the company yourselves in London. If he can't obtain a renewal, you have very little time to get the cash together, and if you are not able to do that then you lose everything. This is what I came to tell you, although I have been a long time about it. Now I must go."

She rose, gathered her belongings from the table and stood with the parasol pressed against her. Wentworth came around to where she was standing, his face paler than usual, probably because of the news he had heard. One hand was grasped tightly around one wrist in front of him. He felt that he should thank her for what she had done, but his lips were dry and somehow the proper words were not at his command.

She, holding her fragile lace-fringed parasol against her with one arm, was adjusting her long, neatly-fitting glove, which she had removed before tea. A button, one of many, was difficult to fasten, and as she endeavored to put it in its place her sleeve fell away, showing a round white arm above the glove.

"You see," she said, a little breathlessly, her eye upon her glove, "it is a very serious situation, and time is of great importance."

"I realize that."

"It would be such a pity to lose everything now, when you have had so much trouble and worry."

"It would."

"And I think that whatever is done should be done quickly. You should act at once and with energy."

"I am convinced that is so."

"Of course it is. You are of too trusting a nature. You should be more suspicious; then you wouldn't be tricked as you have been."

"No. The trouble is I have been too suspicious, but that is past. I won't be again."

"What are you talking about?" she said, looking quickly up at him.

"Don't you know you'll lose the mine if——"

"Hang the mine!" he cried, flinging his wrist free and clasping her to him before she could step back or move from her place. "There is something more important than mines or money."

The parasol broke with a sharp snap, and the girl murmured "Oh," but the murmur was faint.

"Never mind the parasol," he said, pulling it from between them and tossing it aside. "I'll get you another."

"Reckless man!" she gasped. "You little know how much it cost. And I think, you know, I ought to have been consulted—in an—in an affair of this kind—George."

"There was no time. I acted upon your own advice—promptly. You are not angry, Jennie, my dear girl, are you?"

"I suppose I'm not, though I think I ought to be, especially as I know only too well that I held my heart in my hand the whole time, almost offering it to you. I hope you won't treat it as you have treated the sunshade."

He kissed her for answer.

"You see," she said, putting his necktie straight, "I liked you from the very first, far more than I knew at the time. If you—I'm not trying to justify myself, you know—but if you had—well—just coaxed me a little yourself, I would never have sent that cable message. You seemed to give up everything, and you sent Kenyon to me, and that made me angry. I expected you to come back to me, but you never came."

"I was a stupid fool. I always am, when I get a fair chance."

"Oh, no, you're not, but you do need some one to take care of you."

She suddenly held him at arm's length from her.

"You don't imagine for a moment, George Wentworth, that I came here today for—for this."

"Certainly not," cried the honest young man, with much indignant fervor, drawing her again toward him.

"Then it's all right. I couldn't bear to have you think such a thing, especially—well, I'll tell you why some day. But I do wish you had a title. Do they ever ennoble accountants in this country, George?"

"No, they knight only rich fools."

"Oh, I'm so glad of that, for you'll get rich on the mine, and I'll be Lady Wentworth yet."

She drew his head down until her laughing lips touched his.

"Jennie," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Do you think this is a courteous treatment of a business partner?"

CHAPTER XX.

Although the steamship that took Kenyon to America was one of the speediest in the Atlantic service, yet the voyage was inexpressively dreary to him. He spent most of his time walking up and down the deck thinking about the other voyage of a few months before. The one consolation of his present trip was its quickness.

When he arrived at his hotel in New York he asked if there was any message there for him and the clerk handed him an envelope, which he tore open. It was a cable dispatch from Wentworth, with the words "Longworth at Windsor. Proceed to Ottawa immediately. Get option renewed. Longworth duping us."

John knitted his brows and wondered where Windsor was. The clerk seeing his perplexity, asked if he could be of any assistance.

"I have received this cablegram, but don't quite understand it. Where is Windsor?"

"Oh, that means the Windsor Hotel, just up the street."

Kenyon registered, and told the clerk to assign him a room and send his baggage up to it when it came. Then he walked out from the hotel and sought the Windsor.

He found that colossal hostelry, and was just inquiring of the clerk whether a Mr. Longworth was staying there when that gentleman appeared at the desk and took some letters and his key.

Kenyon tapped him on the shoulder.

Young Longworth turned 'round with more alacrity than he usually displayed, and gave a long whistle of surprise when he saw who it was.

"In the name of all the gods," he cried, "what are you doing here?" Then, before Kenyon could reply, he said, "Come up to my room."

They went to the elevator, rose a few stories, and passed down an apparently endless hall, carpeted with some noiseless stuff that gave no echo of the footfall. Longworth put his key into the door and opened it. They entered a large and pleasant room.

"Well," he said, "this is a surprise. What is the reason of your being here? Anything wrong in London?"

"Nothing wrong so far as I am aware. We received no cablegram from you and thought there might be some hitch in the business; therefore, I came."

"Ah, I see. I cabled over to your address and said I was staying at the Windsor for a few days. I sent a cablegram almost as long as a letter, but it didn't appear to do any good."

"No; I did not receive it."

"And what did you expect was wrong over here?"

"That I did not know. I knew you had time to get to Ottawa and see the mine in twelve days from London. Not hearing from you in that time, and knowing the option was running out, both Wentworth and I became anxious, and so I came over."

"Exactly. Well, I'm afraid you've had your trip for nothing."

"What do you mean? Is not the mine all I said it was?"

"Oh, the mine is all right; all I meant was, there was really no necessity for your coming."

"But, you know, the option ends in a very short time."

"Well, the option, like the mine, is all right. I think you might quite safely have left it in my hands."

It must be admitted that John Kenyon began to feel that he had acted with unreasonable rashness in taking his long trip.

"Is Mr. Melville here with you?"

"Mr. Melville has returned home. He had not time to stay longer. All he wanted to do was to satisfy himself about the mine. He was satisfied, and he has gone home. If you were in London now you would be able to see him."

"Did you meet Mr. Von Brent?"

"Yes; he took us to the mine."

"And did you say anything about the option to him?"

"Well, we had some conversation about it. There will be no trouble about the option. What Von Brent wants is to sell his mine, that is all."

There was a few moments' silence, then Longworth said: "When are you going back?"

"I do not know. I think I ought to see Von Brent. I am not at all easy about leaving matters as they are. I think I ought to get a renewal of the option. It is not wise to risk things as we are doing. Von Brent might at any time get an offer for his mine, just as we are forming our company, and, of course, if the option had not been renewed, he would sell to the first man who put down the money. As you say, all he wants is to sell his mine."

Longworth was busy opening his letters and apparently paying very little attention to what Kenyon said. At last, however, he spoke:

"If I were you, if you care to take my advice, I would go straight back to England. You will do no good here. I merely say this to save you any further trouble, time, and expense."

"Don't you think it would be as well to get a renewal of the option?

"Oh, certainly; but, as I told you before, it was not at all necessary for you to come over. I may say, furthermore, that Von Brent will not again renew the option without a handsome sum down, to be forfeited if the company is not formed. Have you the money to pay him?"

"No, I have not."

"Very well, then, there will not be the slightest use in your seeing Von Brent."

Young Mr. Longworth arched his eyebrows and gazed at John through his eyeglass. "I will let you have my third of the money if that will do any good."

"How much money does Von Brent want?"

"How should I know. To tell you the truth, Mr. Kenyon, and truth never hurts, or ought to, I don't at all like this visit of yours to America. You and Mr. Wentworth have been good enough to be suspicious about me from the very first. You have not taken any pains to conceal it, either of you. Your appearance in America at this particular juncture is nothing more nor less than an insult to me. I intend to receive it as such."

"I have no intention of insulting you," said Kenyon, "if you are dealing fairly with me."

"There it is again. That remark is an insult. Everything you say is a reflection upon me. I wish to have nothing more to say to you. I give you my advice that it is better for you, and cheaper, to go back to London. You need not act on it unless you like. I have nothing further to say to you, and so this interview may as well be considered closed."

"And how about the mine?"

"I imagine the mine will take care of itself."

"Do you think this is courteous treatment of a business partner?"

"My dear sir, I do not take my lessons in courtesy from you. Whether you are pleased or displeased with my treatment of you is a matter of supreme indifference to me. I am tired of living in an atmosphere of suspicion, and I have done with it, that's all. You think some game is being played on you—both you and Wentworth think that—and yet you haven't the 'cuteness,' as they call it here, or shrewdness to find it out. Now a man who has suspicions he cannot prove should keep those suspicions to himself until he can. That is my advice to you. I wish you good-day."

John Kenyon was glad back to his hotel more suspicious than ever. He wrote a letter to Wentworth, detailing the conversation, telling him Melville had sailed for home, and advising him to see that gentleman. He stayed in New York that night and took the morning train to Montreal. In due time he arrived at Ottawa and called on Von Brent. He found that gentleman in his chambers, looking as if he had never left the room since the option was signed. Von Brent at first did not recognize his visitor, but, after gazing at him for a moment, hesprang from his chair and held out his hand.

"I really did not know you," he said; "you have changed a great deal since I saw you last. You look haggard and not at all well. What is the matter with you?"

"I do not think anything is the matter. I am in very good health, thank you. I have had a few business worries, that is all."

"Ah, yes," said Von Brent. "I am very sorry, indeed, you failed to form your company."

"Failed!" echoed Kenyon.

"Yes; you haven't succeeded, have you?"

"Well, I don't know about that; we are in a fair way to succeed. You met Longworth and Melville who came out to see the mine. I saw Longworth in New York, and he told me you had taken them out there."

"Are they interested with you in the mine?"

"Certainly; they are helping me to form the company."

Von Brent seemed amazed. "I did not understand that at all. In fact, I understood the exact opposite. I thought you had attempted to form a company and failed. They showed me an attack in one of the financial papers upon you, and said that killed your chances for forming a company in London. They were here, apparently, on their own business."

"And what was their business?"

"To buy the mine."

"Have they bought it?"

"Practically, yes. Of course, while your option holds good I cannot sell it, but that, as you know, expires in a very few days."

Kenyon, finding his worst suspicions realized, seemed speechless with amazement, and, in his agony, mopped from his brow the drops collected there.

"You appear to be astonished at this," said Von Brent.

"I am very much astonished."

"Well, you cannot blame me. I have acted perfectly square in the matter. I had no idea Longworth and the gentleman who was with him had any connection with you whatever. Their attention had been drawn to the mine, they said, by that article. They had investigated it, and appeared to be satisfied there was something in it—in the mine, I mean, not in the article. They said they had attended a meeting which you called, but it was quite evident you were not going to be able to form the company. So they came here and made me a cash offer for the mine. They have deposited £20,000 at the bank here, and, on the day your option closes, they will give me a check for the amount."

"Serves me right," said Kenyon. "I have been cheated and duped. I had grave suspicions of it all along, but I did not act upon them. I have been too timorous and cowardly. This man Longworth has made a pretence of helping me to form a company. Everything he has done has been to delay me. He came out here apparently in the interests of the company I was forming, and now he has got the option for himself."

"Yes, he has," said Von Brent. "I may say I am very sorry, indeed, for the turn affairs have taken. Of course, as I have told you, I had no idea how the land lay. You see, you had placed no deposit with me and I had to look after my own interests. However, the option is open for a few days more, and I will not turn the mine over to them till the last minute of the time has expired. Isn't there any chance of your getting the money before then?"

"Not the slightest."

"Well, you see, in that case, I cannot help myself. I am bound by a legal document to turn the mine over to them on receipt of the £20,000 the moment your option is ended. Everything is done legally, and I am perfectly helpless in the matter."

"Yes, I see that," said John. "Good-by." He went to the telegraph office and sent a cablegram.

Wentworth received the dispatch in London the next morning. It read: "We are cheated. Longworth has the option on the mine in his own name."

(To be continued.)

The Unwelcome Kiss.

In Russia the expense of traveling by rail was simply ruinous until January 13 of the present year. Even third-class tickets cost a deal more than in any other country in Europe, and offered the passenger little less than the direst discomfort for his money. Hence people who could paid the difference and went second-class, while those who were unable to scrape together even the third-class fare made a private and illegal arrangement with the conductor, or else bid themselves under the seat till they came to their journey's end. Where there is a will there is always a way—in Russia.

The interior of a third-class railway carriage is depressing. Sometimes an army of wild, unkempt harvest men, armed with scythes, sickles and formidable sticks, invade the carriages, endangering the features of the other occupants, offending their eyes and ears, and surcharging the atmosphere with heavy, unbalmy odors. Rags, milk pails, unclean pillows, untanned boots, vodka bottles, chunks of black bread and brown cheese rolled up in red handkerchiefs lie about loose everywhere. The floor is moist or wet, bestrewn with sunflower seeds, cucumber peels and every kind of garbage and refuse; the windows are hermetically closed, and the pungent smoke of makhorka tobacco stings the eyes and impregnates the clothing forever. In a word, the interior of such a compartment differs in few essentials from that of a Morocco prison.

That was in the old days of expensive railway traveling, which have only just drawn to a close. Things are, if possible, a trifle worse at present, seeing that tickets are, so to say, to be had for the asking. For sixty who patronized locomotion by rail a twelvemonth ago, at least a hundred make use of it today. The results are obvious. But nobody who possesses delicate nerves or developed sensitiveness, would dream, under the new conditions, of traveling "on the cheap." Second-class fare is very low and very well worth the difference.

But Olga Mikhailovna Skraghina did not think so. This lady is nothing if not economical—at least in all matters not connected with dress—and she deemed it an excellent stroke of business to travel third-class instead of second, and save the difference. She relied upon her sex, and more especially upon her personal charms, to secure her such extra attentions from her male fellow-passengers as would surround her with all needful comfort. And she was not far out in her calculations. "Her cheek was of the rose's dye, Her lips the ruby's hue," and her manner was simply fascinating. Mme. Skraghina was a young widow on her way from Petersburg to Rostoff to visit the family of her intended second husband, and to be led by him to the altar. She had no need whatever to travel third-class, and, as the sequel proved, it was a penny wise, pound foolish thing for a respectable Ishinovnik's widow to do.

Between Voronesh and Rostoff the third-class carriages were taken by storm, and the passengers packed like herrings in a barrel. One of them, indeed, had to stand up near the stove, which, of course, was not heated. You could hang a hatchet in the atmosphere of the compartment, so thick and tangible had it become from the smoke of marhorka and the respiration of human beings. When the shades of night had fallen and the two dismal candles were lighted all of the passengers were silent, sad and suffering, and nearly all endeavoring to drop off asleep. Only one kept wide awake and observant—the man beside the stove.

On the hard, wooden seat opposite, but uncomfortably near to Mme. Skraghina, sat a comely young man who had been caught casting furtive glances at his fair vis-a-vis in the gloaming. But he, too, was dull and drowsy now, as he sat between two brawny, snoring moshiks. Once he lost his balance and dropped on the floor. Then he and the lady opposite went on "nid nid nodding" in unison. Their nods at last brought their youthful faces together, with less gentleness than seemed desirable, for the youth's manly forehead came into sudden and violent contact with the lady's pretty chin, whereupon they both woke up and exchanged ideas. The exchange was rapid and painful; he stammering out disjointed excuses and she expatiating on the need of his conducting himself with propriety. Then they settled down to it again, and nodding began anew.

Shortly afterward they put their heads together once more, his face resting on the very top of her glossy hair, and his weight almost disturbing her equilibrium. But a few sleepy remonstrances and sheepish apologies closed the contretemps, which was soon followed by a third. This time the lady woke up and said she would stand it no longer; and no wonder. She had received such a sledge-hammer blow from the young man's "brazen" forehead, as she called it, that her exquisitely chiseled little nose was momentarily flattened like a pancake, while a river of tears flowed down her rosy cheeks. Then there was trouble. The young man was abject in his apologies, the lady scathing in her reproof. The other passengers snored on in blissful ignorance of the altercation going on. Only the traveler who was standing by the stove noticed everything carefully and enjoyed it.

After this mishap the hero and the heroine suffered from a fit of sleeplessness. But nature at last asserted her supremacy and their eyes began to close as before. Mme. Skraghina took good care to keep her head well upon the wooden back of the seat, so that however low the drowsy youth might bob and nod she would be unmolested. With this exception, things assumed their former aspect and nothing was heard save the rumbling of the train and the snoring of the passengers. But this was merely a truce, not a definite peace. Fate seemed to be pursuing the lady indefatigably for her ill-judged economy.

The Persian poet Saadi says that sleep is given to the bad in order that the good may be undisturbed. But it was not vouchsafed to all the bad in that railway carriage; for suddenly, just before the train entered a little station, a male head bent down and drew shockingly near to Mme. Skraghina's face, then two lips pressed very violently upon hers, as if plucking up kisses by the roots that grew there. Then the head was withdrawn. The whole thing was over in a twinkling. The kiss went tingling to the lady's panting heart, and when it was gone "the sense of it did stay." The lady awoke in a terrible rage, her cheeks flushed with the crimson of modesty and anger combined, and her face rather black—perhaps from smoke and soot—but she was resolved to make her cowardly aggressor both black and blue, by way of giving color to her estimate of the impropriety of his conduct. So without hesitation, discussion or warning she delivered a vigorous slap in the face to the dozing youth opposite, which brought him back from the land of Nod in a hurry. That was her version of the line, "Take, oh, take those lips away." The young man rubbed his eyes, then, feeling the tingling touch of a vanished hand, held one of his to his burning cheek, and at last exclaimed:

"My God! whatever has happened?"

"I'll let you know, you ruffian, what has happened. I'll teach you to assault a lone, unprotected lady who happens to fall asleep," and by way of imparting the promised information, she caught him by the hair of his head, after the manner of the angels who used to seize the Hebrew prophets when sent to transport them from place to place. She caught him by the collar and shook him against the seat and thumped him lastly, till he must have felt thoroughly convinced of the truth of the saying that "the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." His senses were bewildered, his hair flew about in bunches, his tie was torn and his shirt studs shaken out. No wonder his choler rose. Most of the starch, however, had been taken out of the wretched man, who began to shout wildly; thereupon the lady screamed, an old woman in the next row of seats, waking up, hearing the hubbub, devoutly but hurriedly made the sign of the cross and shouted:

"Murder! Fire!"

The other passengers, starting from their sleep, cried out:

"Collision! Accident!"

Some snatched their hand luggage and made for the door, others tried to escape without taking any of their portable property. One man asked whether it was a collision or a slip off the rails. Two others gathered about the young woman, who was in hysterics, inquiring where she was wounded, and the confusion and disorder was indescribable.

But that was only in the beginning, before the inmates of the compartment had shaken off their drowsiness and thoroughly rubbed their eyes. Little by little matters were cleared up, and Mme. Skraghina appealed to the passengers for protection. The young man protested that he was innocent as the babe unborn and much more in need of protection than she. But they all sat upon the youth and took the lady's part. They sent for the head conductor, who came, accompanied by the controller, who, having heard the story, drew up a "protocol" and ordered the young man to leave the train at the next station. He implored them to allow him to continue his journey at least, saying that they might do what they liked at the end of it, otherwise he would lose an excellent situation and probably also a beloved bride.

"Besides, I never touched the lady. I am prepared to take my solemn oath I didn't."

"Oh, indeed," replied Mme. Skraghina; "then you think no more of perjury than of assaulting unprotected ladies. Didn't you bring your head three times up to mine and touch my face with yours in spite of my expostulations? Come, now, answer me that; yes or no?"

"I—I did, I suppose—in fact, I know I did; but then that was when I was half asleep."

"Oh, was it? You hear that?" she asked, addressing herself to the officers. "Then perhaps you kissed me when half asleep, too, eh?"

"I did not kiss you at all. I have no recollection of it, and I certainly had no wish to do it. I would no more kiss you than——"

This was a weak defense to make, for the lady was very attractive, and it was also very ungallant. Besides, the passengers and the officers would hear of no excuse.

"It was the act of a blackguard, and you must put up with the consequences. Will you stop that boisterous laughter down there, please? I cannot hear my own voice," added the officer, to the man standing at the stove.

"You'd laugh just as boisterously yourself if you were in my place," was the reply. "It's the jolliest farce that I ever saw, and I've seen a goodly number in my day. Why, that young man there with the swollen cheek is as innocent as you or I. He was fast asleep when the kissing was done."

"That's all fudge," replied the head conductor. "Asleep or awake, he must take the consequences of having kissed the lady."

"But he didn't kiss her, I tell you. I saw it all from here."

"Then who did?"

"A dirty stoker who sat on his bunkers on the floor."

"How dare you insult me in this gross fashion, sir?" exclaimed Mme. Skraghina; "is it not bad enough to have been assaulted by a well-dressed ruffian here? Must I now hear it said that I was kissed by a dirty stoker? Head conductor, I appeal to you for protection."

"But you were kissed by a dirty stoker, madame. I saw it, and a very dirty stoker he was, I can tell you. You remember the stoker that squatted down there?" he asked his fellow-passengers.

Yes, they all recollected him very well.

"Where is he now?" inquired the principal guard.

"He decamped at once at the little station which we entered just as the kiss was given."

"It's a shameful lie, sir!" shouted the lady.

"It's no such thing, madame. You were a bit too free with your fingers and hands, that's all. Your sooty admirer left his mark on you, too. Here is a looking-glass. Just glance at your lips and your cheeks, and you will see the imprint of that kiss as clearly as if it were a picture."

And he handed her a pocket mirror, which made her reflect with a vengeance. It is said that a kiss is not tangible nor visible, having neither form nor color. But this kiss was a glaring exception, being visible, and its color was sooty black."

"Yes, there's the stoker's memento, sure enough!" exclaimed the passengers, some of whom screamed with laughter.

"Good God! I'm undone!" cried the lady, who forthwith became hysterical and had something like a fit. It might have been only a feint, however.

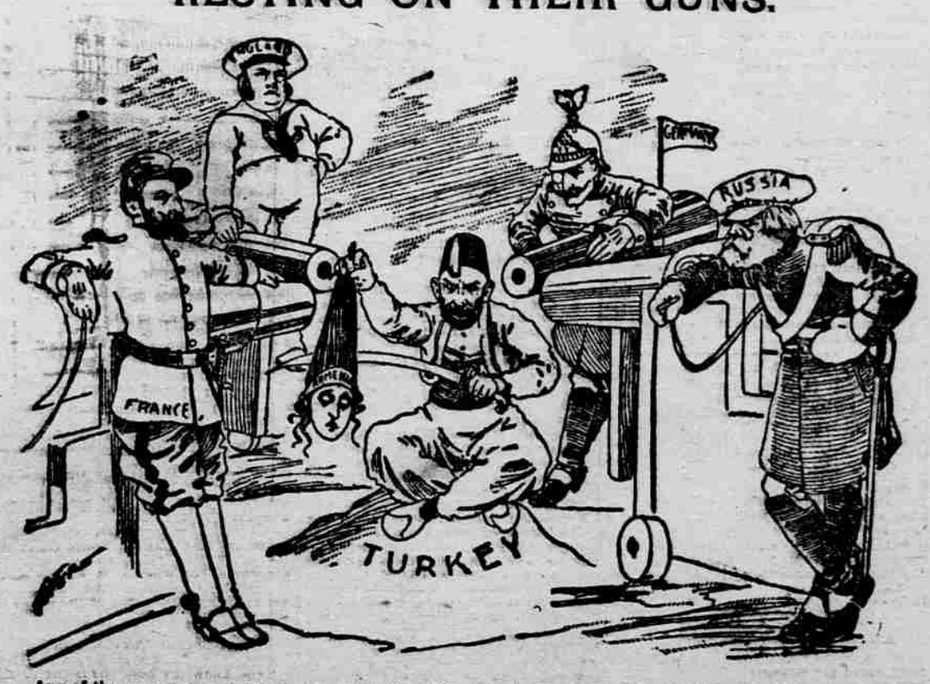
Abundant cold water was thrown upon Mme. Skraghina, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, for now that the facts had been elicited, the passengers found that for a lone, unprotected female, she had defended herself, if not wisely, yet too well, and her victim, whose hair was thinner and whose cheek was much fuller than when he first entered the compartment, declared that he would prosecute her for libel and assault.

When she recovered her senses, she notified the officer of her intention to move to a second-class carriage, and pay the difference, and as she passed through the door she cast a withering look upon the passenger who was standing by the stove and exclaimed:

"Brute!"

Some days later Mme. Skraghina's bridegroom received a letter signed by the "brute" in question, informing him that the lady was seen bobnobbing with a comely young man in a third-class carriage at night; that she assaulted a gentleman who said he would never dream of kissing her, and made no remonstrance whatever to a railway officer who did kiss her as he was leaving the train, and that, generally, her conduct was such that an official protocol had to be drawn up by the authorities.

RESTING ON THEIR GUNS.



Any of the cannoneers might blow Turkey into smithereens, but each is afraid of hitting the fellow opposite.

—San Francisco Chronicle.